

Critical issues for whānau in English-medium schools

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KEY POINTS

- Whānau are integral to the educational wellbeing of Māori students in English-medium education.
- Through the processes of whanaungatanga and collecting kōrero ā-whānau we found that whānau are drawn to schools which have a clear educational philosophy that they can believe in, where Māori student “success” is not just academic, but also cultural.
- There are school specific and wider structural issues that need to change in order for whānau to engage positively with schools.
- Critical issues identified included structural racism and a lack of understanding and recognition of Māori world-views.
- Schools have the potential to promote holistic notions of success which include whānau in the shaping of school curriculums.

Whānau are integral to the educational wellbeing of Māori students in English-medium education. However, very little Māori educational research has been carried out with an explicit focus on identifying the critical issues for whānau in education. This article presents whānau aspirations in English-medium education, and identifies elements that advance whānau educational aspirations. The article concludes with reflective questions that aim to help teachers keep whānau involved in their teaching work.

In 2011–2012 Te Wāhanga, the kaupapa Māori research team within the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), embarked on a research project that asked whānau, “what are the critical issues in Māori education?” A research focus on whānau aspirations in education may appear to be straightforward. However, very little Māori educational research has been carried out with an explicit whānau focus. Our research aimed to address this gap. We thought that an enhanced understanding of whānau experiences and aspirations could contribute to achieving Māori educational wellbeing and success.

The wellbeing of Māori people is largely based on the wellbeing of diverse whānau, which makes this “ground-up” research initiative even more important if Māori educational research is to have impact in the lives of those participating in the education system. Our work aimed to initiate whanaungatanga (relationships) between researchers and different whānau to build an educational research agenda that is whānau-led and Māori-informed (Hutchings et al, 2012).

The kōrero ā-whānau (narratives and history of whānau) for this project differed depending on the areas, learning environments and relationships we held with learning centres, or whānau, or both. The research included many individuals, but we are not reporting these numbers here. Rather, we focused on engaging with a diverse number of learning centres and associated whānau in different geographic locations. In this regard, the participants represented whānau collectives who hold existing relationships with the different learning environments or researchers. This has been a deliberate element of the whanaungatanga methodology and the process of whakawhanaungatanga (building relationships). We wanted to find out about:

- whānau aspirations in education

- areas that need to be strengthened for whānau to reach their aspirations
- advancing whānau educational aspirations.

Following on from these points, we also wanted to identify the critical issues in Māori education in need of deeper exploration.

Many whānau participate in English-medium schools. There is clear evidence that when whānau and schools work well together, whānau and student wellbeing is enhanced (Biddulph, 2003; Ministry of Education, 2008). This article aims to positively influence relationship building between whānau and schools by sharing the kōrero ā-whānau gathered through our research.

Kōrero ā-whānau support the notion that the education system must be culturally coherent, so that tamariki are situated within whānau and are not simply viewed as isolated individual learners (Hohepa, 1999; Ministry of Education, 2011). We are particularly interested in presenting the questions and issues whānau raised as a result of participating in English-medium education. For positive change to take place, it is important to understand whānau aspirations for their tamariki and mokopuna in English-medium schools.

The importance of whānau in education

Whānau are commonly understood as providing “the basis for Māori society upon which other forms of organisation such as hapū and iwi are dependent” (Pihamā, 2001, p. 136). There is a broad consensus that the experience of British colonialism has had far-reaching and complex implications for the New Zealand education system (Ministry of Education,

2008; Simon & Smith, 2003; Whitinui, 2011). This educational context has impacted on whānau differently. One common effect is that whānau have become disconnected from expressions of their reo and tikanga (O'Regan, 2011; Hunt & MacFarlane, 2011). However, this disconnection has resulted in some whānau employing innovative strategies centred on cultural revitalisation and social justice to maintain their distinctiveness in the face of Eurocentric systems and structures. These strategies have engendered a form of cultural navigation that holds much creative potential (Royal, 2012).

A focus on whānau potential creates avenues to explore what whānau aspirations are for their tamariki and mokopuna in education, what elements can be strengthened, and what theories and practices give rise to whānau and student success and wellbeing. Some public and social policies also recognise “whānau potential” in educational systems and pedagogy. For example, Whānau Ora aspires to recognise:

the many variables that have the potential to bring benefits to whānau and is especially concerned with social, economic, cultural and collective benefits. To live comfortably today, and in the years ahead, whānau will be strengthened by a heritage based around whakapapa, distinctive histories, marae and customary resources, as well as by access to societal institutions and opportunities at home and abroad. (Durie, date unknown, p. 7)

Whānau Ora highlights the various determinants of Māori wellbeing, and it challenges systems to account for these while working with the whole whānau to maintain wellbeing. For schools, the introduction of culturally relevant pedagogy can enhance and nurture Māori educational leadership, success and wellbeing (Whitinui, 2011). *Ka Hikitia: Key Evidence* (Ministry of Education, 2008) emphasises that whānau are an important part of the cultural location of Māori in English-medium schools. Similarly, writers concerned with “21st-century education” encourage people to think about how to better align home and school environments, be cognisant of student social and cultural contexts, and understand how the local community of a school can be a learning environment for students (Bull, 2011).

Changes in English-medium education systems have attempted to positively respond to calls for educational change (Tito, 2011). *Tātaiako: Cultural competencies for teachers of Māori learners* encourages schools to undertake work in five key competencies: *wānanga*, *whanaungatanga*, *manaakitanga*, *tangata whenuatanga* and *ako* (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 4). These calls for transformation have aimed at benefiting Māori tamariki and their whānau, as Whitinui (2011) explains:

The idea of Māori students as culturally connected learners is not new, but the concept does require schools and teachers to consider the wellbeing of Māori students in the schooling context more broadly. Indeed, the increased level of attention given to Māori students and their schooling is encouraging. It has resulted in teachers becoming more reflective on how their own cultural values, attitudes and beliefs impact on the way they work with Māori students. (p. 8)

What follows are the kōrero ā-whānau in English-medium schools. These experiences complement the research and policy directions that account for the importance of Māori and whānau cultural world-views in education. Kōrero ā-whānau take the romance out of notions of whānau, and they reveal the power issues inherently involved in Māori education. The kōrero ā-whānau presented here offer opportunities to enhance Māori student success in English-medium schools.

It is important to realise that many Māori values and priorities connect with the philosophy and practice of “Māori education”. In addition, the kōrero ā-whānau in this article have not been analysed through conventional Western research processes of triangulation or thematic analysis. Rather, they are presented as whānau articulated to us.

Kōrero ā-whānau and English-medium schools

We want our children to be the best that they can be, to have a safe experience in education, from both their teachers and their peers. That the information that they're learning is used for good, the information isn't used 'to hold over somebody'. [We want our children] to actually use information and knowledge to benefit us as a whānau, and themselves, as they grow older. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Māori students comprise 56,520 of the English-medium schooling population (Ministry of Education, 2012). At secondary school level, where the focus remains one that is determined by educational achievement (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2012), Māori student achievement rates are 58 percent (Ministry of Education, 2012).

The whānau who participated in this kōrero ā-whānau have experience in 15 different English-medium schools. Whānau who contributed to our research all hold clear aspirations for the success of their tamariki and mokopuna. Our research suggests a number of areas that need to be strengthened in English-medium schools so that whānau aspirations may be realised. In general, whānau need to be able to “see themselves” and be understood as being integral to the educational wellbeing of Māori students in English-medium education.

Whānau aspirations for their tamariki and mokopuna

The notion of Māori student “success” included a range of characteristics, not just academic. Success for these whānau encompassed academic, cultural and general life-skills. Whānau want their tamariki and mokopuna to receive high-quality schooling, and have high quality outcomes. They spoke passionately about their views of education:

[We want our tamaiti] to be safe, to be able to express himself freely, to have confidence built in him. I understand the importance of academic achievement, but what I really want is my child to have the ability to adapt, and adapt ... thinking. I would rather [our tamariki and mokopuna] be able to problem solve as opposed to recite, so they are actually able to use and analyse information ... So that they have a mind, and the education system supports the use of it. [For example] you know what the formula for a triangle is, but what is more relevant for me and what I want for my son, is to be able to adapt to any situation and to be able to think through a problem, and to use information and data as and when necessary. On another level there's the social aspects, social things that I want him to be able to do. Peer relationships etcetera. It's a significant period of time that they'll be in the system, so [I] want my son to be able to interact well with others, to know what is right and wrong ... A lot of that is taught and experienced with their peers, which brings in the whole other factor of other kids' influences on my child as well. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Whānau believed schools should meet whānau aspirations. Sadly, very few felt as though their aspirations were being realised. Only a small number of whānau members were positive about their experiences and the outcomes for their whānau. Whānau are drawn to schools that have a clear educational philosophy which they can believe in. For example, one whānau member discussed how school choice reflected a desire for a holistic educational experience:

I chose [that school] because I love their emphasis on harmony with nature... And the very spiritual aspects of the [school] principles... You know, consciously recognising the need to harmonise our minds with our hearts, our physical, mental and spiritual [dimensions]. And, mainly because of their environment... They don't introduce reading and writing till [the tamariki are] 7 [years old]. The whole philosophy of the education is common sense, that the education is designed to work with the development of the human being... I really like that... Having said that, I have to just trust that I made the best decision. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Realising whānau educational aspirations

Elements that enhanced whānau learning and education in English-medium schools included:

- understanding “success” as holistic
- developing values-based education
- increasing Māori teacher numbers
- encouraging greater whānau–school engagement.

Success as holistic

Whānau want to see success defined in a way that *includes* cultural, spiritual and academic possibilities. Many of the whānau believed that the current notions of ‘success’ are solely based on reaching the appropriate levels of academic success—that is, NCEA credits. They wanted schools to focus more on the ‘whole person’. Some whānau explained that establishing peer-mentoring based on Māori notions of tuakana–teina, or older and younger students, was helpful. Whānau participants believe it is important for Māori students to be part of a strong collective:

Success for me [is a] well-rounded people [that] can fit in any culture, doesn't matter where they are ... What I really notice most was those two [kids that] went to [that school], where everything they did [was] in terms [of] Māori [culture] ... They knew how to manaaki, they knew how to awhi, they knew what whānau was, and what that actually meant ... They knew tuakana–teina. The elder two went to a convent [school] that talked about love, caring, sharing, [and] it was only because they had my mum, our whānau and the marae, that they were able to demonstrate that ... They could talk about all of that stuff, but what did that actually mean ... The balance was being able to be part of [a] Māori [community]. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Whānau perceived the dominant understandings of student “success” as limited. Many believed that they are grounded solely on notions of academic achievement, as this whānau member exclaimed: “That's where I see education as unsupportive in a way, that lack of recognition of simply already being successful, whether we meet their criteria or not ... [There is a] huge emphasis on meeting a particular criteria” (Kōrero ā-whānau).

Developing values-based education

Whānau believe that developing “values-based education” within English-medium schools can help ensure tamariki and mokopuna are able to have positive schooling experiences. Participants explained that any discussion of “values” must be inclusive not only of students and how students interact with one another, but also of how teachers

and the schooling process impacts on tamariki generally: "I think that comes back to the values—if you don't have a real honest set of values, that just shows me you are actually not valuing these minds you're meant to be growing. By leaving them to their own devices, by shutting them out in the cold, by making them run around in bare feet in the middle of winter" (Kōrero ā-whānau).

For whānau, a strong values base for students includes respect and safety. Some whānau believe that including an explicit section on values in the curriculum, and as part of the school culture, could be a way of improving the morale and culture of a school. For example, one whānau member explained that a focus on values, such as respect, could counter bullying. Whānau must be included in school decisions about how values-based education is put together and articulated internally and externally.

Increasing the numbers of quality Māori teachers

Whānau saw teachers as having a key role in helping tamariki and whānau achieve their aspirations. Positive teachers were remembered as having significant impact on the education of tamariki. The converse was also true. To encourage change, whānau offered an example of positive practice:

I was at a school camp for a whole week, and I watched this guy and thought, this is amazing ... They [the school] did realise this was a unique teacher, who respected every one of them [the kids] and celebrated each personality ... I was really taken with that. I've never forgotten that. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Kōrero ā-whānau indicated a need to increase the number of quality Māori teachers who are culturally responsive to the "whole person". For whānau, these Māori teachers can act as positive role models for tamariki:

They [tamariki] are taught in a way by a Māori teacher that they can relate to... You know, you have Pākehā teachers that try their hardest, well some of them do, to relate to these Māori kids... But at the end of the day it's really, really difficult for them to because they're coming from a whole other world. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

I chose to put her into the [that] school because I feel that the people in that school embrace all language[s]... I was right, because a year and half later she just couldn't wait to speak Māori ... So I'm very pleased about that ... In saying that, our [local] school doesn't have a Māori teacher, [and] it suffers in that area. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Encouraging greater school–community trust

Whānau believe that facilitating positive relationships within the school community and whānau will assist Māori educational aspirations. Ideally, whānau

relationships need to be positive across all aspects of the school. Participants talked in some depth about peer, tuakana–teina, teacher–student, teacher–whānau and whānau–school relationships. For participants, positive and affirming relationships on all levels of schooling are considered to be necessary for Māori tamariki, mokopuna, and the wider whānau. This is so that a sense of common purpose and belonging among the school and whānau can develop.

There is potential for a better way of educating our kid ... It's around using that whole older sibling, or the older relationship in the school, otherwise the relationship that they [can] build is very segregated ... [I'm thinking] of country schools, where you have an entire family at a school, that it's not being utilised in a way in which it should be. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

The foundation for kids being happy at school, and safe, [is] having that relationship ... You never know what you're sending the kids home with, but if they can trust one adult, or if they can feel comfortable at school, then they're going to be learning ... If they don't have that then they'll block you out, so I think everything else comes from that, every sort of curriculum area or subject... I know it sounds flowery but I know when you go a bit deeper than that's what it's all about relationships in the classroom. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

When whānau feel they can approach teachers and the school to talk about their child's education, a positive learning experience takes place:

Even if you just go in the morning to drop the boys off, just to sort of get a rapport with the teacher and a bit of a relationship built up ... So that you have the confidence to go and see them. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Areas to strengthen

Areas for development identified by whānau were extensive, and included school specific and wider structural issues. Critical issues identified included structural racism and a lack of understanding and recognition of Māori world-views.

Treatment of racism

Whānau firmly believed that racism impeded their educational aspirations. Participants saw racism expressed through:

- a lack of commitment to te reo and tikanga Māori
- a view of Māori as deficient
- mispronunciation of Māori names
- construction of Māori children as "problem" children
- lack of inclusion of Māori knowledge and history within the curriculum
- lack of commitment to engage fully with whānau Māori

- limited or lack of engagement with hapū and iwi of the area
- lack of knowledge or training of non-Māori teachers in relation to Māori understandings and practices.

These issues were consistently raised by whānau, and are areas that need to be urgently addressed. For one whānau, their schooling experience demonstrated to them that their tamariki were not uniquely Māori, which meant their whānau cultural identity was not acknowledged, which was troubling:

That's the thing with these schools, our children are unique. I don't care what they say, they can call us what they like, our children are unique and they [English-medium schools] are not fulfilling their responsibilities to our children. The core is racism. A lot of these teachers aren't getting over their own subcultures. Therefore they can't address things with our children, in particular violence in schools, which they like to call bullying, which affects the education of the children. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Whānau believed that many teachers' expectations for Māori remained low. For them this was demonstrated through the deficit views and approaches taken. For example, Māori tamariki and whānau were often referred to as 'lacking'. According to whānau, often teachers articulated that the failure lay solely at the feet of those tamariki and their whānau.

Understanding and recognising Māori world-views

Whānau explained that their tamariki were confronted with schooling experiences that did not recognise their Māori cultural backgrounds and heritage. Examples of this included teacher practices that demonstrated a low level of awareness of Māori world-views, and teachers disciplining Māori students because they did not understand them:

It's the teachers' lack of understanding of who Māori are. [They] haven't even bothered to look into why our Māori children are like they are. Because if you put those children on a marae, they are Māori children, they know how to be Māori. They [teachers and schools] need educating themselves. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

It's the everyday life culture [reflecting te ao Māori throughout the curriculum]... Even their classroom [should] reflect a bit of me ... Some brown people on the walls maybe ... I mean it's a small country school, surely part of their curriculum should be learning about their local whenua. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

I have had to work in a predominately Pākehā school... I had a group of Māori students that were seen to be rat bags. I saw something that was lacking there, and it was their cultural identity and pride in themselves. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Not surprisingly, low recognition and understanding of Māori world-views limited the provision of Māori language and culture. For example, te reo and tikanga Māori was often not offered to whānau as a curriculum option. Only one participant explained that the bilingual option was available to them:

I know the school tries and they do a lot of different things, but it's actually upping their own expectations and their levels of Māori understanding of education Māori ... It's not just kupu and it's not just kapa haka, there is a whole other side of Māori culture that they're not really tapping into. I think there's a lot of stuff that could be used to grow healthy, happy young people [in schools] ... A positive community and all those types of things ... So yeah, that it is actually an everyday thing, part of the [school] culture. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

One whānau offered the following suggestions to use Māori world-views in teaching practice:

I prefer that education be about the four pou: whānau, wairua, tinana and hinengaro, that encrusts the whole child, the whole being, based on Māori culture... [The] whole whānau being involved in the teaching of our tamariki from our kaumātua, our pākeke, and whānau katoa ... Being involved in nurturing our tamariki and educating them, having that balance of that academic education ... As far as tikanga, yeah nurturing the pride of being Māori. I think the only way to do that in our generation today is to educate them in who we are. (Kōrero ā-whānau)

Curriculum and pedagogical approaches for Māori students were identified by whānau as requiring urgent attention. Whānau explained that curriculum content was often irrelevant to Māori. Their tamariki were becoming bored in class, which was interpreted by some teachers as the student being "a problem", "lacking motivation" or "lacking an interest in learning". Whānau wanted the curriculum to be made more relevant and include a range of learning styles. Some whānau noted that fundamental life skills were not included in the curriculum. For whānau, life-skills meant tamariki being given practical opportunities to learn how to problem solve and take responsibility when making decisions.

Conclusion

The wellbeing of Māori people is largely based on the wellbeing of diverse whānau. In policy the English-medium educational system acknowledges this and aims to be culturally coherent so that tamariki are situated within whānau, and are not simply isolated individual learners. However, in practice, more must be done by the English-medium system to account for everyday whānau experiences. Whānau experiences of the English-medium system must be articulated, acknowledged and

acted upon in order for Māori success and potential to be realised. Such practices contribute to 21st-century learning approaches that link students, whānau, and their social and cultural contexts. These connections offer possibilities for student learning that extend beyond the school gates and encompass the lived realities of their local community.

Our research into the critical issues facing whānau in education offers one contribution to a programme of changes that can enhance Māori student and whānau educational experiences. Three broad areas help to frame the critical issues for whānau in English-medium schools.

- *Whānau aspirations for their tamariki and mokopuna:* Whānau are drawn to schools that have a clear educational philosophy which they can believe in. For example, the notion of Māori student “success” is not just academic. Success, for whānau, includes academic, cultural and general life-skills.
- *Realising whānau educational aspirations:* Whānau believe that schools have the potential to focus on the “whole” person and promote success in holistic terms. For example, educational programmes that are culturally responsive and engender student respect and school safety can be helped by peer-mentoring and promoting positive role-models. These efforts can be further assisted by encouraging greater trust between school and community, along with whānau participation in school curriculums.
- *Areas to strengthen:* There are school specific and wider structural issues that may need to change so that whānau can engage positively with schools. Critical issues identified include structural racism and a lack of understanding and recognition of Māori world-views. Whānau reported that more needs to be done to train and professionally develop teachers and school leaders in relation to Māori world-views, understandings and practices. This work can be complemented through a set of curriculums that is relevant to Māori students and whānau and which include a range of learning styles. Whānau reported that they want their tamariki and mokopuna to have practical opportunities to learn how to problem solve and take responsibility for themselves.

Below are some reflective questions that connect with the three broad areas outlined above. The questions aim to help teachers keep whānau involved in their teaching work:

- What are the preferred individual and collective methods of communication with whānau, and is there a mix of te reo and English being used?
- Is your school seeking PLD programmes for staff that focus on how to create a culturally responsive school and teachers? If so, how effective have they been for teachers and the school?
- What processes are in place so whānau are involved in planning their child’s learning, and kept “in the loop” about their progress?
- Are school professional, learning and development opportunities being offered that focus on fostering positive school–whānau relationships?
- How “whānau friendly” are children’s reports, and do they include academic, social and cultural achievements?
- How do your school programmes build on whānau interests and strengths?
- What school–whānau events take place, and how do these celebrate Māori student successes? (These could include annual whānau evenings, or marae visits, or a combination of both, along with sports days, goal-setting days and celebrations of Māori success in whole-school events.)

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Te Wāhanga is the Māori research team within the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. We are committed to making a positive difference to education outcomes for Māori and to supporting transformative Māori educational thinking. Our work adheres to kaupapa Māori research principles, guided by tikanga. We undertake research, evaluation, policy analysis, professional development, and the development of research-based resources.

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